

Puerto Ricans are Americans!

"We live in a global world. My daughter has been lucky enough to meet many people from other countries, such as England, France, and Puerto Rico."

-----From a statement by a local official in Virginia, 2017

The quotation above is instructive for all of us because of its misinformed origins. Puerto Rico is not "another country." It is part of the United States, and its citizens are citizens of the United States. Although the statement may sound innocent enough and come from a thought process without malice, it comes to us in a context where our society, dominated by Anglo culture, has historically viewed non-Anglo people and cultures as "other" or as somehow outside what it means to be "American." We need to make it clear that people from *and in* Puerto Rico--and all citizens in the United States who are considered "Hispanic"--are *Americans*.

The United States acquired Puerto Rico as a result of the Spanish-American War of 1898. In 1917, Puerto Rico officially became part of the U.S., and in 1952 completed its own constitution. Today, its citizens elect their own governor, and vote in the primaries for President of the United States. The people of Puerto Rico also elect a Representative to the U.S. Congress, but that representative may not vote on bills that come to the floor of the House of Representatives. This is an unusual situation when we consider that the population of Puerto Rico is more than the states of Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana combined—and these states all have voting members in Congress!

Clearly, the political status of Puerto Rico in the U.S. is in somewhat of a "gray" area, but its citizens are not. They are citizens of the U.S., and they can come and go freely between Puerto Rico and the mainland United States. Additionally, Puerto Rico pays taxes to the federal government. Though the median income on the island is \$20,166—below the poverty line of \$24,400 as a median income—Puerto Rico pays corporate taxes and its citizens pay federal income taxes if their income source does not come from the island itself. All in all, Puerto Rico pays more federal tax to the IRS than the states of Vermont, Wyoming, the Dakotas, and Montana pay in federal income tax.

Today, 3.2 million people live on the island of Puerto Rico, and 5.5 million people of Puerto Rican descent live in the continental United States. But when we say "Puerto Rican descent," this can be just as complex as using the term "Hispanic." There are multiple identities that intersect in the people of, and from, Puerto Rico. This, again, is due to historical forces, movements, and events. When the Spanish landed in Puerto Rico, the indigenous people known as the Taino were already living there. Due to disease, conquest, and Spanish subjugation, most of the Taino peoples died under Spanish rule—but not before some mixing of the races and the cultures. Additionally, Spain, you will remember, was active in the Atlantic slave trade. Kidnapped people of African descent were brought to Puerto Rico by Spain, and they, too, mixed with people of Spanish and Taino descent. So ethnicity, culture, language, race, and national origin have created a multi-dimensional character to the people of Puerto Rico since the 1500s.

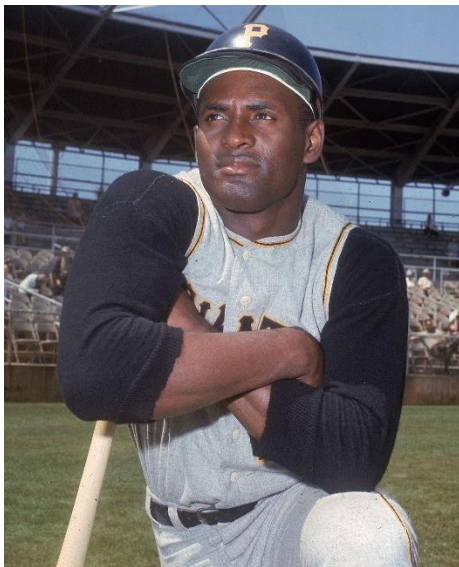
Some famous Puerto Rican Americans are: The Hon. Sonya Sotomayor, the Supreme Court Justice, Sylvia Rivera, the well-known activist for the rights of trans-gendered people, and Lin-Manuel Miranda, the creator of the hit musical *Hamilton* on Broadway. Though these and many other Puerto Rican Americans have, and do, make significant contributions to our society, our culture, and our communities, it will be informative and instructive to focus on the life and work of one famous Afro-Hispanic Puerto Rican citizen who died in 1972: Mr. Roberto Clemente. Clemente was born in Puerto Rico in 1934, the youngest of 7 children, and grew up working the fields as a farmer with his father and siblings. He was a talented athlete from the beginning—first in track & field, and then in baseball. He played in Puerto Rico between 1952 and 1954, but then was scouted and picked up by the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1955.

Clemente's first language was Spanish. He had a hard adjustment coming to the mainland to play baseball, given that he was one of the first Black players in the league after Jackie Robinson, and given that he

had to learn English. He not only persevered and excelled at baseball, but he joined the U.S. Marine Reserve and served from 1958 to 1959. For the Pirates, and in the major leagues, he was known as one of the finest players, the strongest arms, and the best batters in the sport.

Off the field, Clemente was an outspoken activist in community service and for civil rights. He met Dr. Martin Luther King when King visited Puerto Rico, and considered him an inspiration. Clemente denounced segregation publicly and condemned the Jim Crow policies that forced him and other Black players to wait on the team bus for food from the White players—since Black players were not welcomed in the restaurants. Meanwhile, Clemente worked to support poorer communities in Puerto Rico and the mainland by raising money for food and relief supplies whenever he could. He died in a plane crash at age 38 in 1972, while traveling on a flight to Nicaragua with relief supplies for victims of the 1972 earthquake in Managua. He had arranged the flight himself, after learning that much of the relief sent to Nicaragua at the time was not making it into the hands of the people who were suffering, but instead was being hoarded by the wealthy supporters of the country's leader, Anastasio Somoza.¹

Roberto Clemente was, and is, a shining example of multiple human identities coming together at the “intersection”: a Black man; a Hispanic man; an Afro-Latino; an athlete; a citizen; an activist; a community contributor; AND an American. Most of these layers of his identity made his life a real challenge—and it would help us in our society today if we remembered that his challenges—and his contributions—are echoed in the lives of countless Puerto Rican Americans today.



"Anytime you have an opportunity to make a difference in this world and you don't, then you are wasting your time on this earth."

- Roberto Clemente

¹ See *Remembering Roberto Clemente as a Black Man who Fought Against Racial Injustice*, <https://www.latimes.com/sports/dodgers/story/2020-09-08/roberto-clemente-fought-racial-injustice>